Monthly Labor Review

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Reflections on the occasion of the 100th anniversary of the Monthly Labor Review

Editor's note: This essay is part of a series being published to help commemorate the Monthly Labor Review's centennial (July 1915–July 2015). The essays—written by eminent authorities and distinguished experts in a broad range of fields—cover a variety of topics pertinent to the Review and the work of the Bureau of Labor Statistics. Each essay is unique and comprises the words and opinion of the author. We've found these essays to be enlightening and inspirational. We hope you do as well.

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It is an honor to comment on directions for the Monthly Labor Review MLR over its next 25 years. The MLR is the federal government's oldest continuous publication—first printed in 1915 and now published online by the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), one of the nation's oldest statistical agencies, established in 1884. BLS embodies the standards articulated by the Committee on National Statistics (CNSTAT) in the fifth edition of its quadrennial volume Principles and Practices for a Federal Statistical Agency (National Research Council, 2013). P&P lays down four principles: that a statistical agency produce data relevant to policy issues, earn credibility with data users, earn the trust of data providers (e.g., households, businesses), and maintain independence from political and other undue external influence. P&P also offers 13 practices, such as the continual development of more useful data, openness about data sources and limitations, wide dissemination of data, an active research program, and collaboration with other statistical agencies. The MLR exemplifies many of these practices and thereby helps BLS achieve the principles we believe are critical to the success of a federal statistical agency. Not only does the MLR serve as an accessible outlet for authoritative labor statistics, but it also publishes original articles that cover substantive issues related to the state of the labor force and methodological developments, all the while maintaining objectivity and policy neutrality. A quick review of recent

tables of contents reveals that the MLR editors look far and wide in their search for relevant articles. That editorial policy epitomizes best practice for a statistical agency and helps explain the wide appeal of this publication.

In thinking about the future scope of the MLR, it makes sense to look back at the climate in which BLS was founded. Agitation for a federal statistical agency began as early as the 1860s and gathered steam with the formation of organized labor groups such as the Knights of Labor and the American Federation of Labor. Finally, in 1884, overwhelming majorities in both houses of Congress approved a bill to establish the Bureau of Labor [Statistics]. One representative declared, “A great deal of public attention in and out of Congress has been given to the American hog and the American steer. I submit, Mr. Chairman, that it is time to give more attention to the American man [and woman]” (Ewan Clague, quoted in Joseph P. Goldberg and William T. Moye, The First Hundred Years of the Bureau of Labor Statistics, Bulletin 2235 (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, September 1985), p. 3.

BLS was charged to produce statistics on conditions, broadly defined, of the American worker in an era of rapid industrialization. Topics of early BLS study included hours and wages of men and women workers, child labor, effects of immigration in labor markets, labor force conditions for minorities, household living standards, prices and the cost of living, and strikes, lockouts, and other aspects of industrial relations.

In the future, the editors of the MLR will need to keep in mind the reason there is a BLS: to report on the conditions of American workers and American households, disaggregated by geographic area and such demographic characteristics as gender, age, ethnicity, race, and more. Analogous to concerns articulated 100 years ago are those voiced today about the adequacy of wages and benefits, the growth of inequality, and work schedules that do or do not accommodate family or personal needs. The effects of immigration and the cost of living are also as much a focus of attention today as they were 100 years ago.

Although topics of interest may resemble those of the past, the challenge for the MLR editors is to keep up to date with nuances of emerging issues—for example, implications for workers of the meteoric rise of sharing businesses, such as Uber and Airbnb. Regular perusal of social media may give the editors valuable signals about developments that require added or modified data—from BLS’s own programs or those of other agencies, the private sector, or academia, with which BLS might usefully partner. Similarly, the MLR editors need to keep abreast of societal changes with data quality implications, such as declining survey response rates and the increasing availability of data streams from other sources, to make sure that the pages of this designed-to-be-informative journal alert readers to both the changes and their effects. In these ways, the MLR can continue not only to serve its primary function of informing the nation about labor conditions, but also to help BLS identify areas of needed data improvement in order to fulfill its mission of reporting on the economic status of the American worker and household.

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